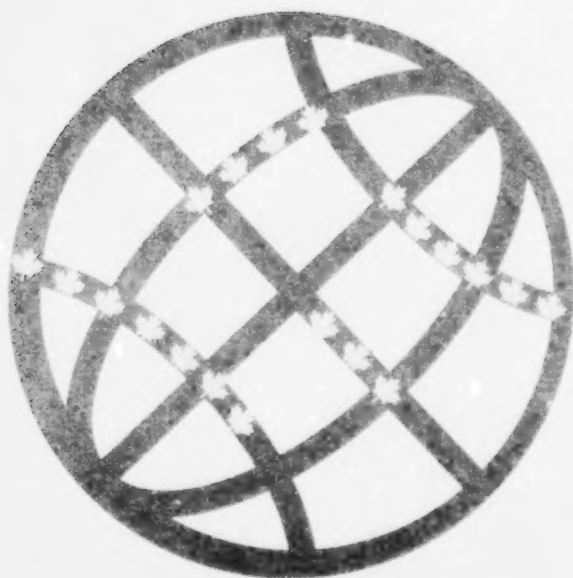


Canadian Centre
For Foreign Policy
Development



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CHILD LABOUR ROUNDTABLE
-Report on an Informal Consultation-
March 25, 1996
Ottawa



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Lester B. Pearson Building
125 Sussex Drive
Ottawa

INTRODUCTION

The Honourable Lloyd Axworthy, Minister of Foreign Affairs, invited representatives from UNICEF Canada, NGO's, Non-Profit Organizations from the business sector, students and government agencies, to participate in an informal roundtable discussion to provide advice on two issues related to child labour:

1. Eliminating the exploitation of child labour - Canadian policy options.
2. Child labour as an issue in the larger context of the well-being of children.

The roundtable was co-chaired by Senator Landon Pearson and Lucie Edwards, Director General, Global Issues Bureau.

An agenda for the roundtable is included as Appendix A

The list of participants is included as Appendix B

THE REPORT

A - DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

What is child labour? How is it a problem? Whose problem is it?

The subject was introduced with two presentations, the first by Jerry Kramer, Director, Economic and Social Development Division, DFAIT, and the second by Cathie Guthrie, Unicef-Canada. They explained how the problem is widespread, not only in Asia, but in Africa and Latin America, each region with its own characteristic type of child labour. The variety and the reasons for child labour defy simple classification or definition. The ensuing discussion brought out the following considerations:

- Children are employed because they are cheaper, more docile and will carry out dangerous work which adults refuse to do.
- When considering child labour, girls doing household work are not unusually included, and yet constitute a large share of working children that are often abused.
- Where rights and development tend to clash, successes have been observed when multiple approaches and community buy-in have been used.
- The impact of globalisation of the economy on children in Canada needs to be evaluated for its effect on education, especially in the case of mothers working in the textile industry.
- The notion of children at work in a context of apprenticeship, versus working children being abused, needs to be sorted out. A context favourable to both work and education is needed. The income obtained by working children gives them economic power they do not want to lose.
- Child development policies need to take into consideration the positive aspects of children at work (where abuse is absent) and its link with education.

B - EXPERIENCE

What is being done about it? Who is doing it? What have we learned?

This perspective on child labour was introduced with presentations from Gerry Barr, Steelworker's Humanity Fund, and Kathleen Ruff, Canadian Antislavery Group. The first speaker noted that some progress had been made as a result of the GATT agreement -- it has provided a good labour code, with acceptance of neutral monitoring. Now ILO and WTO need to come together to develop mechanisms to monitor the respect of human rights, and this information would need to be made public.

The second speaker noted that child labour is just the tip of the iceberg, and that extreme poverty is a direct cause of child exploitation and abuse. A focus on the full picture requires the inclusion of child development within development policies.

- National institutions often do not know how to work with NGO's.
- Government needs to carry out an evaluation of initiatives that have worked and those that have not, in reducing / eliminating child labour (e.g. Rugmark; Levi Strauss; IPEC; Bangladesh experience). Monitoring by (local) NGOs as neutral judges of child labour appears promising.

- The focus of child labour tends to be on international trade, yet 95% of the problem is national.
- Surveys show that consumers are willing to pay more for products which provide assurance of no child labour (e.g. coffee). But the assurance needs to come from neutral representatives such as NGOs because the private sector is generally distrusted.

C - FUTURES: POLICY-MAKING AND POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Canadian action: What are the policy arenas? Who are the actors? What do we need to do in foreign policy, in the market place, in development policy?

Initial responses to the questions were provided by presentations from Stephen Beatty, Canadian Apparel Federation and Ann Weston, North-South Institute. The former, representing small and medium size enterprises, spoke of the need for Canadian import policies on child labour to be tailored to different situations (countries) and to include some flexibility, because products refused entry into Canada will likely find a market in another country. In that respect, Canada should make public the trade practices of other countries.

Ann Weston suggested to address the problem of child labour at a macroeconomic level, such as through the World Bank and through ODA policies of donor countries, partly because the problems are far more frequent in domestic markets than in international trade.

- A matrix should be prepared with ideas expressed as possible approaches to the problem; this could also be used as a checklist of where we are going. It could provide information on the Canadian institutions active on child labour and on their areas of activity.
- Suggestions for areas of focus for Canadian policy include (a) inspections of conditions of work of children, (b) extent of availability of education for working children, (c) focus on Latin America, where 25% of children are estimated to be working, (d) lessons from positive experiences in some Commonwealth countries (India, Bangladesh).
- Arguments pro and con were given as to whether WTO should be an organization of focus on this issue (international trade vs domestic market). WTO is developing trade standards, and in due course, and with time, these may be used to regulate domestic labour practices.
- The type of education which is important for working children is not reading and writing, but development of self-esteem, goal building, mentorship, public speaking, etc.

- Children and orphans of AIDS are particularly vulnerable to labour abuse.

D - NEXT STEPS

Policy options? research? further consultations? recommendations to the Minister?

- As much information as possible on this question should be available on the DFAIT WWW home page, with hyperlinks to the home pages of others interested in this issue.
- A clear, multilayered, multisectoral government policy is needed on this question.
- It is necessary to refrain from using only solutions "made in Canada"; valid solutions need to involve consultations with those living with the problem. Consideration needs to be given to supporting solutions and initiatives from other countries, rather than inventing our own.
- Initiatives exemplified by the "Rugmark" approach remain controversial -- child labour is simply displaced to the domestic market, vs the powerful international message given by a country against bonded labour.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Minister Axworthy:

- Announcement of an internship program, to provide the outside sector with exposure to the issues on child labour.
- Encouragement to put information on the WWW, as a means of circulating it.
- It is necessary to enlist the cooperation of other countries, to work together on this question, starting with the U.S.A.

Others:

- It is important to develop a matrix on what is currently being done, and on what has worked and what has not.
- We need to have all Canadians speak with the same voice, to the effect that bonded child labour is to be eliminated. This includes the voice of Canadians

working in UN agencies. We need to work with the media in an effort to ground the issue.

- A suggestion that the Subcommittee on Human Rights of the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs hold hearings on this issue, as a means of obtaining media coverage.
- We need to have a major Canadian conference on this issue.